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Gay rights law advocates bring human faces to the state debate

MARK PETERS Staff Writer, - The Associated Press contributed to this story.
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George O'Brien talked Wednesday of the name-calling, bullying and eventual dismissal he faced at work because he is gay.

Two other Mainers, Martin Ripley and **Adam Flanders**, told similar stories of discrimination to reporters and cameras. But their real audience was the Maine electorate, the thousands of voters who will decide Nov. 8 whether to repeal a law that protects gays and lesbians from being fired, denied credit or refused an apartment because of their sexual orientation.

"The reason I am here today is so that this won't happen to people again, so that someone in my shoes won't have to put up with harassment," said O'Brien, a 27-year-old roofer from Newcastle.

The press conference was organized by Maine Won't Discriminate, a group campaigning to keep the law.

With less than two weeks until Election Day, advocates for the gay rights law say it is important to show voters who is affected by it. But those opposing the law continue to question how widespread discrimination is in the state, and whether the number of examples justifies legislation.

"Mainers are very tolerant people by and large," said Michael Hein of the Coalition for Marriage, a group opposing the law. "They fear not the persecution of certain groups, but being overburdened by legislation."

The stories of discrimination presented by Maine Won't Discriminate come a week after the Portland-based Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence issued a report documenting dozens of similar cases. Maine Won't Discriminate launched a television commercial this week focused on what gays and lesbians face without the law.

Jesse Connolly, who is running the campaign, said the three men who spoke Wednesday are only a few of the people who have faced harassment and discrimination in the state. He said it is important to put a human face on the issue, and said the campaign will continue to try to do that up until Election Day.

Ripley of Whitefield and Flanders of Belfast joined O'Brien in talking about their experiences. Both testified earlier this year when the Maine Legislature held a public hearing before passing the gay rights law.

Ripley said that when he came out publicly that he was gay, he was threatened on the job and told that he might be found "floating in the river." He said he lost more than one job because of his sexual orientation. He tried to seek some kind of recourse, but said a state worker who spent four hours trying to help him found that nothing could be done.

Flanders said he was hassled at Belfast High School and suspended for wearing a T-shirt that said, "It's OK to be gay." He said teachers and administrators did not stop the constant harassment he faced from classmates. Officials for the Belfast schools did not return calls Wednesday.

Connolly, the campaign manager, dismissed questions about how many cases of discrimination the campaign has found, saying the law is justified even if only one person is discriminated against. He said the three men made a difficult decision to tell their stories, and the campaign did not verify the accounts.

"These people are not numbers. . . . These are their real stories and real experiences," Connolly said.

In an interview following the press conference, Hein questioned how many such stories exist, and whether a few dozen examples in a state with more than a million residents justifies the law.

He said the Coalition for Marriage and other groups that support overturning it will work in the closing weeks on getting their base of supporters to the polls. This will happen through a grassroots network of churches around the state. This base worked to collect more than 50,000 signatures earlier this year to force the vote on a repeal of the law.

"We have an intrinsic advantage," said Hein of Augusta.

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Says he was called names, bullied and eventually dismissed from his job.

George O'Brien, Newcastle

Says Belfast H.S. officials did not stop classmates from harassing him.

Adams Flanders

Says he lost jobs due to sexual orientation and the state said it could not help.

Martin Ripley, Whitehead

QUESTION 1

THE QUESTION on the Nov. 8 ballot reads: "Do you want to reject the new law that would protect people from discrimination in employment, housing, education, public accommodations and credit based on their sexual orientation?"

A "YES" vote would repeal the law. A "no" vote would keep the law on the books.

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